

**TRANSFORMATIVE  
ORGANIZING:  
TOWARDS THE LIBERATION  
OF SELF & SOCIETY**



**SOCIAL JUSTICE LEADERSHIP**



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# **PART 1:**

# **THE THEORY OF**

# **TRANSFORMATIVE ORGANIZING**

## **An Authentic Reckoning**

Incredible shifts have happened over the past few years that will forever change how people in the United States relate to politics, the economy, and the world. Despite the mainstream character of his policies, the election of Barack Obama undeniably signals a new dawn in American politics that many did not think would be possible for at least another 50 years. In addition, the international economic crisis is impacting the well-being of many families, and it is having a particularly devastating impact on communities that were already economically and politically marginalized. Finally, the reality of global warming will force the entirety of the planet's industrialized nations to permanently change their relationship to energy use, one way or another.

Important political battles are raging. A few months ago, there was an opportunity to dramatically change healthcare in this country. Although the majority of Americans are in favor of healthcare reform, we witnessed a surging backlash against the proposed policies. The long-standing battle to redefine immigration policy has also taken a turn for the worst recently, as shown by the passage of SB1070 in Arizona.

The glaring deficiencies in the infrastructure and capacity of the social justice sector have been revealed more sharply than ever over the past year. Social justice work – and grassroots organizing in particular - is incredibly important to the process of

building an authentic democracy. Historically, grassroots organizing has served as the spark for major social advances in this country, for example in the South in the 1950s and in Northern and Western urban areas in the 1960s and 1970s. But over the last couple of decades the infrastructure of the social justice sector has been weak. The sector been caught off guard by a series of political developments, and it has been unable to seize important organizing opportunities. These deficiencies are made even more stark by the defeats that progressives have faced in the battles over healthcare and immigration.

It is time for the social justice movement to have an authentic reckoning with our effectiveness. We are at a turning point in history – and it is also a potential turning point in the evolution of social justice organizing. Although the political environment is changing rapidly, the most prevalent organizing models were developed more than 40 years ago. There is a major opportunity for the social justice movement to reassess its approach, envision a new way of organizing, and greatly increase its impact. The question is: Will the social justice movement of the 21st century meet the demands of the changing times, or will we be swept into the dustbin of history?

Social Justice Leadership, a training and movement-building organization, is working with grassroots organizations around the country to develop a new framework: Transformative Organizing (TO). We believe that TO can both change the basic approach and assumptions of social justice organizing and greatly expand its impact. TO is about creating deep change at multiple levels simultaneously: how we are as people, how we relate to each other, and how we structure society. It brings together impactful grassroots organizing with ideological development and personal transformation to create a new paradigm for organizing. We have experimented most deeply with this

new framework through the Transformative Organizing Initiative in New York City, in which nearly 200 staff and members from over a dozen organizations are working collectively to implement TO. We have also worked with individuals from dozens of organizations in other parts of the country.

Most social justice organizing in the United States has focused outward, on building grassroots leadership and community power to change local conditions, public policy and the allocation of resources. It generally has been pragmatic in its orientation, focusing on short- to medium-term change. While this approach has won important victories that have affected the lives of millions, its potential has been greatly limited by its strict focus on external fights and short-term change. Transformative Organizing combines an ambitious emphasis on long-term vision, ideology and movement building with attention to internal personal and organizational transformation. The result is an approach to social change that can be far more powerful than the sum of its parts.

Most importantly, Transformative Organizing demands that organizers and the social justice movement as a whole step fully and powerfully into the uncertainty and opportunity of the present historical moment in order to bring about a societal transformation towards true justice and compassion, equality and interdependence.

## **The Goal: Liberation from Oppression, Liberation from Suffering**

On the one hand, the long-term goal of Transformative Organizing is simple: to help transform society into one that is free from

oppression and free from suffering. The path to get there - on the other hand - will undoubtedly be fraught with difficulties, setbacks, moments of victory, uncertainty, and even downright mystery. There are no easy or straightforward roads to this vision. And it will take more than just organizing to get to true social transformation; other forms of social change work will be needed along with on-the-ground organizing.

Transformative Organizing, however, is foundational for the social transformation process because it engages the populations most excluded from the workings and benefits of society. It differs from more traditional notions of social change in at least 2 ways: 1) TO does not confine itself to systemic or structural change alone. Rather, it seeks to integrate personal transformation and transformation of our relationships into the process of fighting for structural change, and 2) as the name suggests, Transformative Organizing seeks more than mere change. It seeks transformation; it seeks a process so deep and thorough that a reversal to previous conditions is impossible.

Transformative Organizing recognizes that people experience oppression and exploitation from the political and economic system and that people also experience suffering from the situation of their existence.

## **Oppression, Suffering, and How They Are Related**

Oppressions – including racism, sexism, classism, homophobia and able-ism among others. – generally takes a form wherein a dominant group in society subjugates other groups and ex-

tracts their labor, wealth, bodies, identity and dignity for the benefit of the dominant group. More specifically, it manifests in forms of violence, exploitation and exclusion such as police abuse, poor wages, lack of healthcare, homelessness and sub-standard housing, domestic violence, racial profiling and deportation.

Current forms of social justice organizing are well-oriented to deal with these forms of direct and indirect violence. For the last 50 years, social justice movements have tried to systematically organize people to oppose this system and to fight for a more just alternative. While oppression manifests in the lives of individuals, it is inherently systemic. It is structured through the political system, the economy, and civil society. Thus, while individuals can be sheltered from abuse and exploitation, oppression is a system-wide phenomenon. It can, therefore, only be transformed at the systemic level through changing the structures, practices, and culture of a whole society.

Suffering, on the other hand, is a way to describe the anxiety, fear, stress, disappointment, self-loathing, and other psychological and emotional conditions that show up in people's lives. The social justice movement is not generally well-equipped to deal with suffering. The key distinction between oppression and suffering is that suffering is an internal response to the external conditions that we face. Some suffering is a result of oppression; other suffering is not. In many cases, the suffering that poor and working class people and other oppressed groups experience is directly related to the oppression that they face. Exploitation, police violence and other forms of oppression can be physically incapacitating (even deadly), and they can be psychologically and emotionally paralyzing. The fear, doubt, self-hatred, and internalized oppression that can come

from these experiences are a form of suffering.

While suffering can be rooted in oppression, it can also be generated from other life experiences. For example, a person who has an “over-achieving” older sibling can have a consistent feeling of self-disappointment and always feel the need to play catch-up. That person’s parents may have discouraged or ignored their achievements while showing greater support and encouragement for their sibling. This can lead to disillusionment and a paralyzing lack of confidence. These kinds of experiences and trauma, and the feelings that result from them, may have little to do with systemic oppression.

But whether these emotions are caused by oppression or not, the internal response can take the form of suffering. Suffering becomes a barrier to people bringing their best selves forward, particularly in interpersonal relationships and in their relationship to themselves.

Although oppression and suffering are related, they are not the same thing. Oppression is imposed from the outside while suffering is generated from the inside. The difference between oppression and suffering is important because it means that different actions are required to transform them. The abolition of oppression requires that we engage society’s structures, whereas the extinguishing of suffering requires that we engage ourselves.

Many people in the world – including many organizers in the social justice movement - are caught in the grips of suffering. The suffering shows up as non-productive behavior and as moods and mindsets that can hamper effectiveness. These behaviors can cause difficult relationships, and they can even derail



whole organizations. At times people unconsciously play out their traumas in organizational and movement spaces, leading to damaged organizational relationships, isolation from allies, and ultimately stagnation.

The experience of Nelson Mandela is instructive. The South African government imprisoned him for opposing the racist apartheid regime, a clear example of oppression. He was powerless to stop this oppression; it was imposed on him by the apartheid political system. His oppression was externally generated. His 27 years of imprisonment were undoubtedly brutal and dehumanizing. Yet he never let the experience take away his dignity or his sense of self. He experienced oppression and pain, but he refused to let his experience be one of suffering that eroded his internal integrity or his wholeness. In the end, Mandela left prison seemingly more balanced and poised than many of his comrades who had not been jailed. Drawing on his vision and compassion, he ultimately led his country into a new era.

Transformative Organizing believes that both oppression and suffering are impediments to people's ability to live whole lives, reach their potential, and find fulfillment. True freedom is incomplete without both liberation from oppression and liberation from suffering.

Because external oppression and internal suffering work together in a vicious cycle to keep each other alive, it is essential to engage both of them through an integrated process. When people are oppressed, their reaction can often be to internalize the oppression by taking on the narrative of inferiority promoted by the oppressor. This internalized oppression is a form of suffering; it is conditioned by external oppression, but it is an internally generated response that degrades a person's whole-

ness, integrity, and sense of self. This internal suffering can impede people from taking action to end external oppression. Stress and self-loathing hinder them from bringing their most effective and clear selves to the task of liberating themselves from external oppression. This inaction then allows the external oppression to continue and to become normalized, in turn causing even more suffering.

## Steps on the Path

Liberation from oppression and liberation from suffering require transformation in two spheres: 1) the creation of a society based on justice, democracy, and equality and 2) the transformation of ourselves and our relationships based on authenticity, interdependence and compassion.

### **1. Creation of a society based on justice, democracy, and equality**

The broader goal of social transformation focuses on completely changing the political, social, and economic relationships between people and groups (by race, class, gender, sexuality, immigration status, and so on). These structural relationships determine the allocation of resources, legal structures and decision-making processes at a societal level. Structural relationships must be reorganized so that systemic oppression will no longer exist.

Social transformation would mean transforming the economy from one based on individual gain into one that is rooted in people's needs. It would be an economy where "productivity" is a measure of fulfillment and not a measure of

how much a product can saturate a market. It would be an economy that has a fair and just distribution of wealth amongst all people.

It would also require re-imagining and re-creating the ways in which people engage in politics, expanding democratic participation beyond marking a ballot once every few years. Genuine democracy would create structures that would allow people to participate in an authentic way in decisions about their communities, cities, states and nations.

## **2. Transformation of ourselves and our relationships based on authenticity, interdependence and compassion.**

The practices and habits of a society are deeply embedded in its people. Although individuals are unique, the habits of society are replicated in the behavior of individuals. These social habits influence how people relate to themselves, to others, and to society as a whole. In turn, the individual's practices and behaviors help to keep the collective culture alive. People who are working for true social transformation must greatly increase their awareness of their default habits and begin to embody intentional practices that reflect the values of the more just society they are working to build.

In particular, the people who have stepped up to the challenge of transforming society – whether they are paid staff organizers or grassroots members – need to identify the ways in which they individually replicate and promote practices that are reflective of this individualistic, competitive, and oppressive society. And they have the responsibility

to demonstrate - through lived practice - what a renewed and just society can look like, embodying interdependence, compassion, and authenticity in all of their relationships.

These two spheres – social transformation and transformation of the self - are integrally linked. The shape of society - its systems, institutions and cultural practices - has a profound impact on how individual people experience life. These structural oppressions lead to externally imposed injustice and pain for oppressed people as well internal suffering for all people.

A society that is structured around justice, around meeting people's needs and helping them to find meaning in their lives, would help to alleviate individual suffering. It would alleviate the forms of suffering that are directly rooted in oppression, and it would also reduce other forms of suffering: fear and anxiety about the future, feelings of self-loathing and inadequacy for not meeting restrictive social expectations and other forms of degraded sense of self. Our unjust society leads to individual suffering for all people.

In turn, individual suffering contributes to the development of an unjust society. It not only shape peoples personal practices, it also shapes their political attitudes and behaviors. When people are stressed, anxious or self-hating, they tend to be more brittle and fragile. Lacking the resources they need to have either inward or outward compassion, they act self-protectively. Instead of being curious and open to other people and extending trust to them, they are pre-occupied with their own well-being. The well-being of others can seem like an annoyance or –worse - as a threat to their own well-being.

We can see the political impact of this dynamic interaction

between social injustice and individual suffering in the persistent scapegoating of immigrants, African Americans, and other disenfranchised groups. This kind of scapegoating tends to increase during eras of political and economic uncertainty, during wars or periods of rising unemployment, for example. In these moments, structural conditions can increase uncertainty, stress and personal doubt for large cross-sections of people. These conditions of society-wide suffering and hardship that exist within a larger capitalist framework of competition and individualism can cause many people who might ordinarily have an interest in working together to improve those conditions (to end war, win government relief and jobs programs, redistribute resources and so on) to instead restrict the compassion and understanding that they might extend to those less fortunate. Thus, instead of seeing people who are more negatively impacted by these structural conditions as potential allies, they see them as competitive threats and try to hold onto the little that they have.

If people are able to reduce their personal feelings of anxiety and self-doubt, they will be less likely to look for quick fixes to alleviate their suffering, whether those are consumption-based fixes like alcohol, television and shopping or political fixes like scapegoating. If people have less suffering in their lives, they would be more likely to extend compassion to those who are living harsher lives, to those who are being excluded from the benefits of society. They would be more able to support long-term solutions for addressing society's problems, solutions for changing the overall conditions that contribute to both oppression and suffering.

How democratic, just, and equal of a society can we have if suffering isn't ended? Conversely, to what degree can we free all

people from internally generated stress, doubt, and suffering if social oppression, exploitation, and exclusion are not abolished? This dilemma is illustrated in the two figures below:

Figure 1

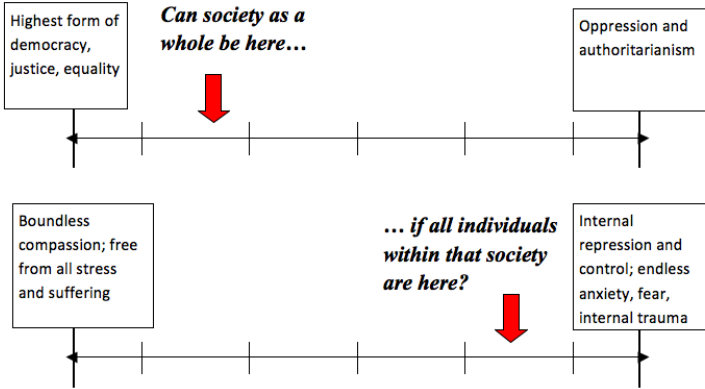
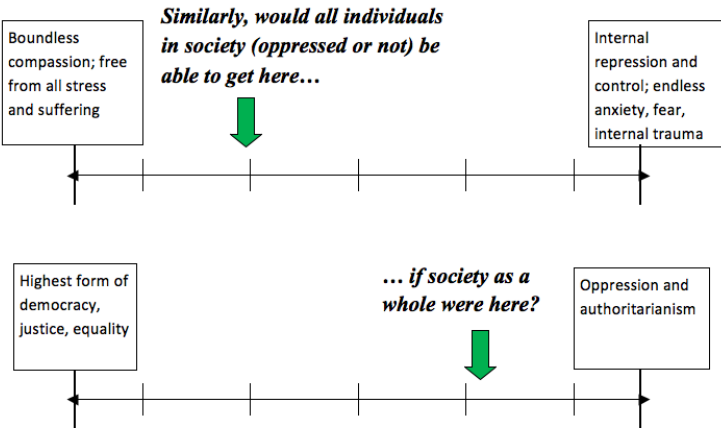


Figure 2



The above figures imply that society cannot reach the highest form of democracy, equality, and justice if the people in that society endure stress, anxiety, and other forms of suffering (re-

ardless of whether or not that suffering is directly related to oppression). They also imply that people cannot be free from internal suffering if their society is structured by oppression. In other words, freedom at the societal level is connected to and conditioned by freedom at the individual level, and freedom at the individual level is connected to and conditioned by freedom at the societal level.

Transformative Organizing is an approach to social justice organizing that engages both levels – social transformation and personal transformation - simultaneously. Both levels are essential to the kind of fundamental transformation that we all seek. An integrated approach will give us a stronger footing for the struggle to transform our political, social, and economic systems, our relationships to other people, and our collective relationship to the earth. Attention to one level alone will ultimately limit the magnitude of social change we are able to achieve. We only have the possibility for true transformation when we can make significant progress in both arenas: when societal structures and practices evolve irreversibly and when people's hearts and minds fundamentally advance. Only then can we achieve authentic transformation. Everything else is merely change

# **PART 2:**

## **THE PRINCIPLES OF TRANSFORMATIVE ORGANIZING**

Transformative organizing is rooted in four basic principles:

1. Transformation begins with self awareness.
2. Intentional practice leads to transformation.
3. Transformation requires vision.
4. Transforming society requires ideological, strategic, mass-based organizing.

### **PRINCIPLE 1: Transformation begins with self awareness.**

Self awareness allows us to see our habitual behaviors and the way in which those behaviors limit our effectiveness. It lets us make an accurate assessment of how we are showing up and how we are impacting others. It helps us to understand how we are impacting ourselves mentally, emotionally, physically, and relationally. Self awareness allows us to perceive things clearly. Reality is often messy and difficult, so we often unconsciously replace reality with more comfortable and appealing mental narratives. Self awareness helps us to be in closer contact with reality as it really is.

We are often unaware of our habitual reactions and of the impact that these reactions have on our lives and on our relationships. For example, an organizer may avoid conflict because it makes her uncomfortable. This kind of reaction will manifest mentally, emotionally and physically. If she has tension with a



co-worker, she may mentally respond by tell herself that she doesn't want to make things worse by drawing attention to the conflict and that's it's better to let it pass. Her mental narrative may be accompanied by emotions of nervousness or fear. She might have an unconscious physical response of tightening her body and turning away during moments of conflict.

Repeated behaviors eventually become ingrained as habitual practices. We usually think of "practice" as an activity we are doing intentionally to get better at a skill, such as learning to play piano or improving our basketball game. In the same way as these intentional practices make us better at what we're doing, unintentional practices make us better as well. However, they may be strengthening our capacity to do things we don't want to do better: avoid conflict, build resentment and so on. We all enact myriad unintentional practices throughout the day. If our organizer repeats her avoidant mental, emotional, and physical reactions every time that she faces conflict, they become deeply habitual and unconscious. If she practices conflict avoidance over and over she will get very good at it. Over time, it will become more and more difficult for her to deal with tensions and conflict directly. Conflict avoidance will become a default practice: a deeply rooted behavior that occurs automatically, consistently, and unconsciously. For our organizer, avoidance becomes a default practice that she embodies as a physical, emotional, and mental reaction to conflict situations.

Our primary default practices often arise when we are children in response to our formative experiences in our families and communities of origin. They continue to develop in our adult lives. We might have faced interpersonal forms of abuse and trauma. We may have been subjected to institutional forms of oppression or violence. These dynamics threaten our feelings

of safety and damage our relationships with others. We react to these kinds of threats by finding ways to protect ourselves.

Take our organizer, for example. She may have had these habitual reactions for a long time. If she grew up in a family where her parents were always fighting or if she was in an abusive relationship as an adult, conflict avoidance may have been a useful survival tool. In those situations, her default practice could have saved her life. The problem is that this same default practice that helped her in the past is now holding her back. It limits her choices in her personal relationships, and it does not serve her well in her organizing for social justice. Conflict avoidance allows differences to fester between people. It stops people from resolving their tensions in ways that could strengthen relationships and that could help move groups towards their collective vision. If our organizer is unable to give people feedback about their actions, she will not be able to support them in growing into more effective and impactful leaders. She may avoid interpersonal conflict within her organization or with allies. Her default practices rob her of her agency and limit her choices; she is reacting to situations rather than responding to them intentionally. To change her default practices, our organizer has to become aware of her tendency to avoid conflict. She will have to realize that - while they may have protected her at some important moments in her life - they are holding her back today.

We stand no chance of transforming ourselves if we are not aware of what we are practicing. Default practices are not limiting because they are inherently bad. In truth, they are neither good nor bad. The problem is that they are habitual; they are our first line of response, regardless of the situation. They limit our ability to choose more effective and powerful paths.

Through practicing self awareness, we can observe our default practices and reflect on how we developed those practices. This awareness gives us more clarity and capacity to intentionally choose our actions in the future.

## **PRINCIPLE 2: Intentional practice leads to transformation.**

Our default practices often seem as if they are integral parts of who we are as individuals and that there is nothing we can do to change them. But with self-awareness we can choose to use intentional practices – another building block of transformation – to transform them. Intentional practices are those practices we undertake to change how we show up in the world, and they can manifest as personal practices or political practices. They are new actions that we take to change our physical, emotional, and mental orientation. By practicing different ways of acting, we can align our actions with our vision for who we want to be and how we want to act. Intentional practices interrupt our old way of being, and they create the possibility of new action.

Transformation requires practice. All material things - that is, things that are not simply ideas, but actually exist in space and time - are in a constant process of change. The pace of that change may be extremely fast or glacially slow, but all material things are in a process of constant change. Sometimes, that change is quantitative like a person's aging process or the slow build-up of organizing efforts. At other times, there are qualitative transformations like birth and death or a social uprising that succeeds in taking down a dictatorship.

These principles of change also apply for people, organizations, movements and societies - the sites where we actually have

agency to enact change. Those processes of change are in essence a form of practice. Change – whether individual or organizational – results from our practices. We don't change just because we decide we are going to change; we have to practice new ways of being in order to make those changes real.

For example, if our organizer decides that she wants to change and learn to deal with conflict directly, she could take up intentional practices designed to help her tolerate strong emotions and to give people difficult feedback. She may take up a practice of giving members with whom she works challenging feedback about their leadership. She might commit to raising one difficult issue with a co-worker each week. If she practices these new behaviors frequently, she will begin to internalize them and embody them. Instead of defaulting to conflict avoidance, dealing with conflict directly will become her most natural response. By engaging in these intentional practices, she can come to understand herself better and learn to relate to others more honestly; she will build more authentic relationships based on greater trust and mutual understanding.

Just as individuals develop default practices, so do organizations and movements. These practices evolve over the course of an organization's development, reflecting the practices that different individuals bring to the work as well as the organization's collective experiences. We often refer to these practices as our "organizational cultures." These practices are embodied behaviors that we have practiced so often that they have become the automatic and unconscious activities of the organization. We can't change these practices by just making a decision or a new organizational policy. They can, however, be changed through the consistent implementation of intentional practices – at both the individual and collective levels - to break

old patterns and establish new ways of being.

For example, we can engage in intentional practices to develop deeper and more grounded political visions in our organizations. Many social justice organizations have a default practice of pragmatism, focusing on the practical demands of the day-to-day struggle as an excuse against any work to develop a long-term vision for their work. This limits the capacity to work towards the kind of transformation that is ultimately desired. If we want to overcome those limits, we need to develop the political and ideological capacities of our staff and members, and promote visionary thinking. We can't simply mandate a political position; we need consistent practices of political reflection. For example, if we want to develop the capacity of our members to articulate a deep vision for alternative economic models, we can take up a consistent practice of studying political economy. We could bring members to other countries to see how these nations have constructed alternative economic systems. Through these practices, our members can internalize a more ingrained vision that they can begin to embody in their work. Instead of functioning as a dogma, their ideological development can serve as a dynamic grounding to inform their long-term vision, organizing strategies, campaign decisions, and negotiations with targets. Deep political study and reflection can transform an organization's entire vision and approach, including its on-the-ground strategies and tactics.

### **PRINCIPLE 3: Transformation requires vision.**

Intentional practice can bring about deep changes in individuals, organizations and society. But for this change to be meaningful, it must align our actions with our values, vision and ideology. We need a clear vision at the personal, organizational

and societal levels. For example, we could have a personal vision of being more calm and responsive during conflict so that we are more effective in our organizing, and we can have a vision for our organizations in which we deal with differences openly and productively. For social transformation, vision is a manifestation of ideology, the ideals and description of how society should work. Vision is the motivation that drives us to take up intentional practices.

Whether it manifests at the societal level as ideology or at the individual level as a commitment to personal development, vision provides the beacon around which practice is oriented. To be effective, vision cannot float disconnected from the real work of changing ourselves or changing society. It must be organically tied to the everyday practice. In order to advance a vision-driven approach to organizing, community organizations can commit to consciously framing their work in a broader political and social change context. For example, an organization working around jobs or housing could frame that work within a larger commitment to ending racial oppression.

It can be helpful to break down our big-picture vision into more specific “commitments.” Specific commitments provide a clear picture of the outcomes we are working to achieve, and they can guide us in aligning our actions with this vision. A clear commitment can help us move through the challenges of transformative change by reminding us of what is at stake and how we will be different if we persevere. Our conflict-avoidant organizer, for example, might ground her personal growth process in a commitment to engage conflict directly by communicating honestly and candidly with others in order to build a more effective organization and movement.

Vision is important in any change process, but it absolutely essential in a transformative process. There comes a point in the transformative process where the old habits, structures, and relationships are being let go, but the new ones have not fully taken hold. This is the transition from a way of being that is comfortable and well practiced to one that is initially unfamiliar and awkward. In this moment - which can last for days, months, or years - vision can play the catalytic role. The vision that things can be different can sometimes be the only thing that overrides the desire to fall back on the old practices.

For Transformative Organizing - which seeks to transform suffering at the individual level and oppression at the societal level - vision is as critical as practice. It plays the crucial role of grounding and directing transformative practice. Personal and political practices that lack vision may result in the reinforcement of other limiting default practices, and true transformation will not occur. Without vision, the only picture we have of how we can be or how society can be is the picture that we have already been living. It is the picture of our current default practices, whether those defaults manifest personally as conflict avoidance or manifest socially as capitalist exploitation and wasteful consumption. We cannot overcome our default practices if we don't have a vision of why we are engaging in different practices. Without the grounding of vision, transformation has no direction and cannot achieve purpose.

#### **PRINCIPLE 4: Transforming society requires ideological, strategic, mass-based organizing efforts.**

Transformative Organizing is, at its heart, about building the power and leadership of oppressed people to change mate-

rial conditions and to alter the structural relationships between groups and classes in society. It aims to provide a pathway for reshaping society so that it is more just, and it offers a way to reshape our relationships so that they are more authentically interdependent.

Different organizing models have won important changes across the United States over the course of the last century. This work has included Communist Party's organizing in the 1930s, Alinsky-style organizing which started in the 1940s and 1950s, civil rights organizing in the 1960s, the movements based on power and identity in the 1960s and 1970s, neo-Alinsky organizing since the mid-1970's, and many other approaches.

Despite many achievements over the last few decades however, organizing has fallen short in meeting the political demands of our times. Instead of seeking to transform power relations, it has often accepted social practices and systems as given and unchangeable. It has narrowed its focus to win a voice in existing processes of decision-making or a larger share of resources within the given power structure. Such organizing – which is usually small in scale - has generally sought changes to local conditions without a clear vision of how society should change; it has not been clear how local reform campaigns could move towards broader goals for structural change nationally and internationally.

Imagine the common example of an organization with a default practice of fighting any injustice that comes its way. This organization is committed to a mission of bringing justice and democracy to the communities in which it works. It sees any significant issues that arise in those communities as oppor-



tunities to recruit more members, build more power, and win more change. It moves to fight automatically, without consideration of other possible responses. Racing from one issue to another and pushing itself beyond its capacity, the organization works its staff and members to the point of exhaustion. It does not allocate significant resources to building its own capacity, believing that its time is better spent engaging in short-term fights for immediate change. Even if the group decides that it wants to develop more skillful and visionary leadership, those efforts will fail if the group's default practices automatically refocus the group back to short-term campaigns and immediate crises.

Transformative Organizing, as a concept that is still in development, hopes to offer a new way to engage our work. It seeks to develop an organizing model that is responsive to the conditions that cause both oppression and suffering and to offer an alternative path towards liberation. TO is evolving, yet the conditions that it must respond to are clear.

The scale of our society is enormous. Thus, Transformative Organizing work must be massive in order to move society along a path of intentional practice towards liberation. Millions of people must be organized if we are to reach a scale that can challenge the current power structure and contend with this society's embodied practices. Organizing efforts must reach mammoth proportions and model compelling democratic processes if we are to wield sufficient power to democratize the broader society.

The dominant values of this society are deeply ingrained, both in structural dynamics and within individuals. Thus, Transformative Organizing must be ideologically grounded in order to provide a vision for social transformation. We need to integrate

intentional practices around vision and values into our larger ideological frameworks. In the course of the process of transformation, there will be an ongoing struggle between the current default practices of this society and the new transformative practices that we are trying to advance. A clear ideological grounding will help us to navigate that struggle and to avoid falling into unintentional practices that reinforce social exclusion and exploitation.

The suffering in society - whether from oppression or life situation - is vast. Thus, Transformative Organizing must be an unabashed source of relief from the doubt, fear, and self-loathing that plague the oppressed. It must empower people to practice an intentionality of 'being' and of inter-relationship that can liberate them from inner states that promote internal oppression and suffering.

The forces of political reaction are powerful. Thus, Transformative Organizing must be strategic in its efforts and in its deployment of resources. Transformative Organizing must place an emphasis on leadership development, on empowering grassroots leaders to lead the struggle for transforming society, and therefore on greatly expanding the capacity of our organizing efforts. It must coalesce our scattered organizations into more strategic forms that can challenge the power of the right. It must aim to break through on issues that deal with universal need such as jobs, healthcare and the environment. We must also use our resources efficiently, demanding the highest level of performance and sustainability from ourselves, our organizations, and our movements.

On all these levels, Transformative Organizing is both visionary and pre-figurative. It is visionary in that it articulates a vision

of the society we seek to create over the long term. It is prefigurative in that it seeks to practice - in the present moment - the values, behaviors, and relationships that we want to serve as the foundation for our future society. Transformative Organizing is about building the world we want to see through daily practices while at the same time fighting to create that world through organizing for structural change.

When these elements come together, social justice organizing can have a great impact on society. When brought fully to life, Transformative Organizing has the potential to dramatically transform the form and functions of social justice organizing. A social justice movement framed by Transformative Organizing would look very different from today's movement. On-the-ground strategies for movement-building would change, new ways of relating to allies and opponents would emerge, and new organizational forms would arise. Whether or not this manifests depends on whether we can actualize these principles in our daily lives and work.

## **Practices for Today**

The four principles enumerated above are broad, and they lay the foundation for TO in a general way. They point the way towards a new framework for grassroots social justice organizing. However, specific practices are also necessary to guide the implementation of Transformative Organizing. SJL's current framework for Transformative Organizing is anchored by 5 Core Practices that can address the most pressing challenges faced by today's social justice movement. These practices can be implemented at three different levels: the individual, the organization, and the movement.

**1) Acting from Center:** Acting from Center is the practice of engaging work and life from the place where we have the most balance, poise, thoughtfulness, and power. Acting from Center recognizes that many things threaten to throw us off balance, but that our greatest strength lies in our ability to return to Center and respond to life with clarity, effectiveness, and precision rather than react from a place of unbalanced thought, emotion, or action.

**2) Interdependence:** Interdependence is the practice of being in relationship with people and organizations from a place of intent, rather than mere happenstance or habit. This practice acknowledges that we cannot reach success alone, and that all relationships - large and small - will better meet peoples' needs if they are approached with attention and intention. Interdependence recognizes that social justice organizations will ultimately only be successful if the broader movement is successful, and that an important component of our work therefore must be movement-building.

**3) Deepening Ideology:** Deepening Ideology is the practice of consciously framing our work in a political and social change context. It is the practice of rigorously vetting and aligning the goals, strategies, actions, and activities of the work against the larger political aspirations and societal transformation that we seek. To practice Ideology, we must develop clear Visions, Purposes, and Worldviews.

**4) Sustainable High Performance:** To practice Sustainable High Performance means to consistently hold a high standard for achieving goals and producing outcomes for the short-term while at the same time attending to personal and organiza-

tional well-being for the long-haul. This practice emphasizes the need for high output, and it recognizes that a fundamental building block of performance is the health and balance of the individual people within our organizations.

**5) Building Power Strategically:** Building Power Strategically is the practice of conducting base-building, developing leadership, and building alliances and campaigns in a way that strategically builds power not only for individual organizations but also for the movement. This practice reminds us of the need to adopt a long-term orientation that moves beyond tactical defensive fights and coalitions and to instead develop strategies and campaigns that build alignment and power across organizations and that can have greater impact on policy, power relationships, and public consciousness.

# CONCLUSION

Organizers and social movement leaders around the country have expressed a growing interest in Transformative Organizing, giving credence to the argument that we need a new approach to social justice organizing to meet the needs and challenges of the new century. We need an approach that recognizes that we need to transform both social structures and the values and practices of the individuals who accept and maintain those structures. We must transform current social values - like individualism, competition and consumerism - and address the ways that these values have shaped our own lives.

Transformative Organizing has the potential to bring about deep individual and social development. It promotes interpersonal relationships characterized by presence, authenticity, and interdependence. These relationships can serve as a foundation for constructing a society based in democracy, equality, and justice. TO is about letting go of fear and doubt - individually and collectively - and living up to our full potential. It is about seeing clearly how we want to be, how we want to relate to people, and how we want to live in society. It's about committing to make that vision a reality, and it's about acting on that commitment with focus, discipline, and courage. Transformative Organizing offers us a path to achieve both individual and collective liberation, challenging us to step fully into the struggle to change ourselves and our society. The opening is here, what choice will we make?

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Any body of work is necessarily the magical synthesis of many things, histories, and experiences. SJL's ongoing development of Transformative Organizing is the result of many people, teachers, lineages, successes, and failures. Most prominently our ideas are born from the decades of grassroots organizing that the various individuals associated with SJL have conducted, which itself comes from the teachings of giants and geniuses of organizing, some popularly known, many unknown. Anthony Thigpenn in particular played a crucial role in our overall vision of what powerful and effective organizing and movement building can look like. We also note the influence that traditions such as the Civil Rights Movement, liberation theology, popular education, and the radical organizing of the 1960's have had on our organizing in general and the development of Transformative Organizing.

Our ideas are also born from our study of practice, which can most specifically be traced to the study of Zen Buddhism primarily taught to us by Angel Kyodo Williams, and the study of somatics primarily taught to us by Staci Haines. We are deeply grateful for the relationships we have built with these folks. We mention them specifically here because it is this orientation to deep awareness and practice that feels like part of a genuine contribution to social justice organizing. Their own learnings of practice, of course, were not spontaneous inventions but can be traced to teachers before them, and can in fact be seen in the wisdom of many indigenous cultures around the world.

Last, SJLs work would simply exist in the realm of ideas were it not for the dozens of organizations and hundreds of organizers who have participated in our programs. They, more than

anyone else, have courageously taken on the mantle of Transformative Organizing by trying to make it a reality in their organizations and their organizing methodology. In particular, the organizations participating in our Transformative Organizing Initiative have continued to explore with us new ways of evolving social justice organizing. We would especially like to thank them for their hard work, dedication, and inspiration.

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